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Feature Article - Dombrovskis, Peter

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Peter Dombrovskis (1945-1996) was an exceptionally gifted nature photographer. From boyhood he had climbed steadily through the ranks to reach the pinnacle of success in his chosen profession. His work is respected by his colleagues and warmly appreciated by the public at large. The works that appeared in his self-published books, diaries, calendars, posters and cards are reproduced from the selfsame photographs that grace the walls of State galleries, institutions and private collections in Australia and abroad. His sublime photographs unquestionably played a significant part in the campaign that saved the Franklin River. Indeed, Tasmanian people may have been more impressed by the visual images produced by Peter Dombrovskis than they were by the endless newspaper reports of conflicting political views on conservation.

It is no idle thing to say that "one picture is worth a thousand words." Words may be distrusted - a picture remains mute. Of course an ill-considered picture may fail to impress, but why do we feel, at once, that a Dombrovskis photograph is of the first rank?

Peter Dombrovskis approached his subject with something like reverence. He considered the possibilities. He never forced a conclusion or resorted to the mere quick-fire snapshot. He preferred the subject to take possession of his heart and mind. He knew that great photographs are the result of a relaxed, passive receptivity combined with an alert overview of the whole process. Beyond this is good technique and the use of fine equipment. All his photographs were taken on a large format 5X4 Linhof Flatbed field camera.

We cannot scientifically "prove" that beauty exists, no matter how persuasive the theory. Generally, we acquire aesthetic enjoyment and judgement slowly, often from the wordless examples of painters, photographers, musicians and dancers. Thousands upon thousands of Tasmanians have, over the past 25 years, grown almost unaware that their visual perceptions of the Tasmanian landscape have been heightened by constant exposure to Peter Dombrovskis' photographs.

Peter Dombrovskis was born in a refugee camp in Wiesbaden, Germany, of Latvian parents in 1945. His father was lost in the last months of World War II. Peter and his mother, Adele Dombrovskis arrived in Australia as migrants in 1950, and moved to Hobart in 1951, where they settled on the slopes of Mount Wellington. Together they roamed its ferny tracks and climbed its crags. Then Adele bought her son his first camera.

Later, as a teenager, his work was noticed by Olegas Truchanas, Lithuanian-born pioneer conservationist and nature photographer. For the young Dombrovskis, Truchanas became an inspiring father-figure, who predicted that Peter would "become one of Australia's great photographers". Olegas Truchanas died in 1972. From this time onward Peter Dombrovskis trod his own path with quiet resolution. His superb photographs, produced year upon year, were unmistakable.

Then, on 28 March 1996, while photographing on the Western Arthur Range in Tasmania's south-west, Peter Dombrovskis died of a heart attack. This serene and modest man was mourned across the nation. His legacy to emerging photographers will endure. His influence on his fellow Tasmanians to better understand their island State is incalculable.

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